



Interview Summary: The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada

Background

The Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau currently serves as the 23rd Prime Minister of Canada. He has been Prime Minister since November 4, 2015 and the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada since April 14, 2013.

The Prime Minister was interviewed by Shantona Chaudhury, Gordon Cameron, Yves Côté, Alexandra Heine, Dahlia Shuhaibar and Nusra Khan on September 9, 2022. Questions about this summary should be directed to Ms. Chaudhury.

Senior officials from the Prime Minister's Office (**PMO**) were interviewed separately by the Commission. This interview summary should be read in conjunction with both the summary of that panel interview, the Institutional Report of the PMO, the summary of the Commission's interview with the Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the Privy Council, and the Institutional Report of the Privy Council Office (**PCO**). This preamble and the text contained in square brackets in the summary that follows consist of explanatory notes provided by Commission counsel to assist the reader.

This Interview Summary is just that – a summary – and does not include everything the Prime Minister spoke about during his interview, nor does it summarize the entirety of his evidence on this matter. Because the structure of the summary differs in certain respects from the structure of the interview, the context in which the Prime Minister made certain remarks and the emphasis (or lack of emphasis) that he placed on various issues may not be reflected in the summary.

Work of the Commission

The Prime Minister noted that the work of this Commission is important, for two reasons.

First, there are competing narratives about what happened, some of which have been shaped by misinformation and disinformation. Most Canadians will view this Commission's report as the historical record of the events of January and February 2022 and the Government's decision to invoke the *Emergencies Act*. The Prime Minister remarked that his decision to partially waive Cabinet confidence in this context was motivated by his view that this Commission and Canadians should know the inputs the government had so that they can understand the circumstances that the country faced and the basis for the decision. With that information, Canadians will be better able to form their own views as to the reasonableness of the decision to invoke the Act.



Second, although enacted in the 1980s, the *Emergencies Act* had never been invoked before. Consequently, there was no guidebook for the Prime Minister and the Cabinet when considering its invocation. The Prime Minister hopes that a future prime minister will be able to look at the Commission's report for guidance.

The Convoy and the Protests

The Prime Minister explained that, as a resident of Ottawa, he thinks about the events of late January/February 2022 in terms of three weekends.

First Weekend of Protests (January 29-30)

The Prime Minister learned about the convoy protest in the days before the first weekend. He explained that he did not know what to expect, but that the anger and violence that he and others saw during the 2021 election campaign were fresh in his mind.

When asked about discrepancies between official briefings and what his political staffers were telling him, the Prime Minister commented that what the PMO staff were seeing on social media highlighted a deeper and more serious level of motivation than what police services were telling the government to expect.

The Prime Minister explained that during the campaign, he and his political staff had observed a level of anger, violence, racism and misogyny expressed in public rhetoric that, in his view, was striking. His staff and RCMP officers, especially those who were female and/or racialized, were subjected to horrific abuse and threats. He noted that the public service in Ottawa, and the political staff who were not on the campaign trail with him, did not live through that and therefore did not fully understand their intensity. He also noted that the number of protesters that came to Ottawa was far greater than the number that police said to expect.

The Prime Minister received many questions from his colleagues, journalists and local Members of Parliament (MPs) about the disruption that citizens were living through as well as the safety concerns of government officials and members of the press. The national media was running stories suggesting that the federal government needed to act, asking questions such as "When is the OPS going to come in?" and "Are they able to handle this?"

Although he was concerned, the Prime Minister understood that the occupation was a matter for the police of jurisdiction, namely, the Ottawa Police Service (**OPS**). He recalled asking his team (including the public service and his ministers) to ensure that the OPS had the resources and tools to properly handle the protest. He was glad that Minister Blair [the Minister of Emergency Preparedness and President of the (then) Queen's Privy



Council] was engaged, given his background in policing protests.¹ Because of his background, Minister Blair knew how to give appropriate support to the police of jurisdiction and could brief the government on how the police response was going.

Nonetheless, the Prime Minister remained concerned, particularly by the openly violent rhetoric used by some protestors online. Because of their experiences on the campaign trail, both the Prime Minister and his political staff were somewhat skeptical of the OPS's assurances that they could properly manage the protest through connections with the convoy organizers and that the protesters would follow the usual pattern of coming to Ottawa, protesting and leaving after a day or two.

Second Weekend of Protests (February 5-6)

The Prime Minister recalls that the second weekend was worse than the first weekend. He recalled that hot tubs, encampments, and a stage had been erected by protesters on Wellington Street. By the second weekend, in the Prime Minister's view, it was obvious that police lacked the ability to end the situation in Ottawa.

By this point, the convoy slow rolls and blockades at numerous points of entry, including the Ambassador Bridge in Windsor, at Coutts, Alberta and at Bluewater Bridge in Sarnia had emerged and more convoys were converging on Ottawa from across the country. There were threats of violence at Coutts, and real concerns about the safety of police officers. The OPS indicated that its officers on the scene were outnumbered by the protesters.

The Prime Minister noted that any hope that the Ottawa occupation would be settled easily was gone, and things were heating up elsewhere.

Third Weekend of Protests (February 12-13)

During the week of February 7, the occupation of Ottawa continued, there were blockades at Coutts, Emerson and the Ambassador Bridge, there were recurring blockades elsewhere, the flow of trade at the Ambassador Bridge had effectively been stopped, and there was a significant increase in the volume of violent online rhetoric. There were some reports that blockaders in Windsor, Coutts and in other jurisdictions were acting in concert with protesters in Ottawa. The Prime Minister was asked to describe the situation on February 11 and 12. He explained that convoys were coming into Ottawa from across the country and there was a staging area in Gatineau. There were new challenges at more

¹ [Minister Blair previously served as the Chief of Toronto Police Service from April 2005-April 2015 and oversaw, among other major public order incidents, the policing of the G20 protests in June 2010 in Toronto. Minister Blair chaired the Cabinet Committee on Safety, Security and Emergencies which met on February 3, 6, and 8 to discuss the protests.]



ports of entry (including Surrey, British Columbia), threats to do the same at Lacolle, Quebec and issues arising in eastern Canada. There was a sense that demonstrators were being tactical and strategic and knew how to take advantage of an ebb and flow; if, for example, they left one port of entry in southwestern Ontario, they could move to another such as Fort Erie.

The Prime Minister noted that in his mind, this was not a peaceful protest. In his view, if a protest threatens violence if law enforcement takes steps to address unlawful conduct, it is not peaceful. He also noted that one of the stated aims of some of the protesters was to replace the government with a committee selected by them. Just six months before, in September 2021, the Canadian population had been consulted in the general election and had overwhelmingly supported parties that were in favour of vaccines and mandates. Now some of the people who were unhappy with the result of the election wanted to see an overthrow of the government and were willing to disrupt and threaten Canadians' security and stability for as long as it took to do that.

The Prime Minister reflected that a big part of the decision-making was the government's judgment call about timing. If the government had invoked the *Emergencies Act* after the first weekend, people would have said it was too soon. If the government had waited six weekends, it would have been too long. The events of the first weekend caught police by surprise. By the second weekend, it was apparent that the police were unable to end it. It was still not taken care of after the third weekend, with current tools and resources. That's when the Prime Minister and Cabinet felt it was right moment.

Challenges Faced in Ottawa

When asked why, in his view, Ottawa had not been able to effectively manage the protests, the Prime Minister raised three considerations.

First, he said that the lesson learned was not to let the trucks park because that makes it more difficult to remove them. He noted that decision-makers in Toronto and Quebec City heeded this lesson.

Second, it was obvious that the OPS required more resources. He noted that there appeared to be a breakdown of communication between the OPS and the City of Ottawa. It was unclear, for instance, whether the Mayor's request for additional police officers was made with the support of the OPS or the Ottawa Police Services Board (**OPSB**).

Third, there were former RCMP and CAF officers participating in the protests, coaching protesters on how to stretch police resources thin, which posed operational challenges for the OPS. The Prime Minister received reports from senior national security officials (including the National Security and Intelligence Advisor and the Director of CSIS) indicating that these individuals were providing strategic direction and benefiting from



good relationships with the police, which prevented OPS from using typical protest management tactics to respond.

He added that the Ottawa protest was a generator of energy that motivated and amplified protests in other locations across the country, including the border blockades. The occupation of Ottawa inspired and emboldened protesters elsewhere.

Ontario's Response to the Protests

The Prime Minister noted that Ontario's decision to invoke its own emergencies legislation on Friday, February 11 was helpful. In conversations that federal government officials had with Ontario officials early on, Ontario was reluctant to raise its head above the parapet; Ontario's initial position was that it was an "Ottawa issue" and therefore a federal problem. The Prime Minister found this frustrating, because the City of Ottawa falls under the jurisdiction of the Province of Ontario. The order of intervention should have been first the municipal government, then the provincial government, and then the federal government. He emphasized that Ontario's position made it difficult to resolve the occupation of downtown Ottawa.

The Prime Minister noted that Ontario's position shifted after the blockade of the Ambassador Bridge in Windsor. Premier Ford expressed that he was very frustrated and worried about both the Ambassador Bridge blockade and Ottawa occupation. He told the Prime Minister that he planned to revoke participants' insurance and licenses but given that many of the trucks involved were licensed and registered in other provinces, there were limits to the effectiveness of the Ontario emergency powers. This made the need for federal intervention all the more apparent to the Prime Minister.

International Engagement

The Prime Minister had several conversations with international officials around the time of the protests. He recalled that the gist of most of these conversations was to reassure Canada's international partners that the protests were under control and to note that this was not a problem faced by Canada alone. He emphasized, in these conversations, that the rise of anti-government protests was happening in democracies around the world. He shared one anecdote in which the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz remarked, during a visit to Canada, that anti-government protesters outside an event venue looked a lot like the protesters in his own country.

When asked, the Prime Minister advised that the situation that was unfolding in the Ukraine at the same time did not have a direct bearing on the government response to the convoy situation. He reflected, however, that there were many commonalities between the two events, such as the role of misinformation and disinformation, the amplification of rhetoric through social media, and the exploitation of division.



Call with President Biden

The Prime Minister had one phone call with the President of the United States pertaining to the blockades. He explained that it was a short phone call, that the President was engaged because of the stoppage in the flow of trade and travel in Michigan, and that the Prime Minister relayed two messages to the President.

First, the Prime Minister reassured President Biden that he was taking the protests seriously and looking into resources and solutions. The Prime Minister wanted the President to know that Canada continued to be a reliable trading partner with the United States. The Prime Minister noted in his interview that there was a real danger of thickening Canada/U.S. borders which would have had catastrophic consequences for Canadians.

The second point raised by the Prime Minister was that the problem wasn't unique to Canada. He informed President Biden that the City of Ottawa's 911 call centre had been overwhelmed by calls coming from the U.S., that much of the funding for the convoy came from the U.S., and that much of the amplification of misinformation was being facilitated by people in the U.S. on social media and television networks like Fox News. They were flexing their muscles in Canada, but talking about doing the same thing in the U.S. There was talk of similar convoys for the Super Bowl.

The Prime Minister recalled that President Biden was also concerned about the rise of extremism is an issue in both countries, and that this was eroding faith in public institutions.

The Incident Response Group

On February 10, 2022, the Prime Minister convened the Incident Response Group (**IRG**). The IRG is a dedicated emergency committee convened in the event of a national crisis. It is comprised of Ministers of the Crown and senior officials. The Prime Minister chaired the IRG meetings. By February 10, the situation in Ottawa, the situation at the Ambassador Bridge and the border blockades, the threat of more blockades, and sense of momentum from perceived successes emboldening protesters all together triggered the threshold for convening an IRG.

In the Prime Minister's view, the situation required a national response. The purpose of the IRG was to identify what tools and resources the government had to respond to the situation, what would be needed to respond, and what the government could do under all existing authorities, or whether new authorities were necessary, either under special legislation or the *Emergencies Act*. The IRG was also designed to get to the bottom of conflicting reports, for example, of the requests for assistance made by the OPS.



The IRG Meetings

At the first IRG meeting on February 10, the Prime Minister asked his ministerial colleagues what the federal government could do to resolve the crisis. They discussed two options or “tracks” for federal intervention. “Track 1” consisted of options under existing laws, while “Track 2” options were those that could be made available under new legislation or through the invocation of the *Emergencies Act*.

Throughout the first three IRG meetings, Prime Minister was focused on the question of what was needed to resolve the situation - whether it was more police officers to enforce existing laws, or whether there were other tools that police needed in order to do so. For example, the IRG looked at the possibility of special legislation to compel tow truck drivers to fulfill their government contracts. Ultimately, it was determined that the legislative process (up to and including royal assent) would have taken weeks. Therefore, the IRG determined that if the police needed new legal authorities, the response would require the *Emergencies Act*'s invocation.

The Engagement Proposal

The Prime Minister was asked about an Engagement Proposal prepared by Deputy Minister of Public Safety Robert Stewart (**DM Stewart**), essentially seeking a mandate to negotiate with the protesters.

The Prime Minister explained that he asked basic questions about the Engagement Proposal, such as who the government would be negotiating with, how the government could have confidence that the representative could follow through, what the government would be offering the protesters, given that their stated goal was the reversal of public policy measures, and what the government would be negotiating for. No one could provide the answers to him. In that sense, the Prime Minister remarked that the Engagement Proposal was not an actual plan, just an undeveloped idea. He also noted that an offer made by the province of Ontario to negotiate with the blockaders at the Ambassador Bridge was rejected, and though he did not have the details, he was aware of previous attempts to negotiate with the protesters in Ottawa which failed to yield any results. He noted that the OPS had made multiple attempts at engagement and had been rebuffed at every turn. In his view, those involved had demonstrated that they were not interested in negotiating, or able to follow through.

At this time, more convoys were coming into Ottawa from across the country, and there were new challenges at more ports of entry. There was a sense that protesters were being tactical, and that if they left one point, they would just move to another, creating a ‘whack-a-mole’ situation. At the same time, the Prime Minister had real concerns, including concerns about armed elements in Coutts and concerns about children and guns or other weapons that may have been in the trucks in Ottawa.



In the Prime Minister's view, without a strong, clear, concerted response, the crisis would persist.

The Emergencies Act

Use of the CSIS Definition of Threat to the Security of Canada

The Prime Minister noted that throughout the three weekends of the convoy events, CSIS highlighted that there was known Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE) adherents in and among the convoy and amplifying the convoy.

He noted that CSIS does not necessarily have the right tools, mandate or even mindset to respond to the threat Canada faced at that moment. He noted that CSIS has a very specific mandate, and that when they are determining whether there is a threat to the security of Canada, they are doing so for the purpose of obtaining a warrant, wire tap, or to authorize an investigation of a specific target.

The Prime Minister noted that CSIS is not tasked with determining whether a public order emergency exists and that the factors that CSIS considers internally for its own purposes are not the frame that fits the situation we were facing. Under the *Emergencies Act*, it is the Governor in Council who decides. The information that CSIS provided was but one of many inputs provided to Cabinet; these included inputs from the RCMP, the NSIA, Transport Canada, other governments and other federal agencies. In the end, the Government decides whether to invoke the Act.

CSIS has been challenged in recent years by the threat of domestic terrorism, which it was not designed to address. He observed that CSIS is limited in its ability to conduct operations on Canadian soil or against Canadians.

The Prime Minister said that in his view, economic threats can trigger national security threats. He indicated that economic harm can lead to civil unrest, pointing to Ukraine and what Russia is doing with natural gas in Europe to explain how economic tactics can trigger national emergencies. Then again, economic threats are not always national security threats. He noted that former President Donald Trump improperly relied on a national security threat definition to justify U.S. tariffs on steel imports from Canada in 2018.

However, the Prime Minister made it clear that the threat situation Canada faced was not merely an economic threat. He pointed out that there were direct threats of physical violence, for example, threat of violence against police officers if they tried to remove the blockades.

The Prime Minister noted that he was reluctant to invoke the *Emergencies Act*. There had been substantial public and media pressure to use the EA during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in and around March 2020. The federal government contemplated



declaring a public welfare emergency under section 5 of the *Emergencies Act* and consulted extensively with the provinces about the *Emergencies Act* at that time. Ultimately, the Prime Minister concluded that while the pandemic was a national emergency, the *Emergencies Act* could not offer capacity or authority that was not already available to the provinces, and the Act was not invoked.

Consultation with the Provinces and the First Ministers' Meeting

At 10:20 a.m. on February 14, 2022, the Prime Minister convened a First Ministers' Meeting (**FMM**) to discuss the possible invocation of the *Emergencies Act*.

The Prime Minister recalled that the perspectives of the provinces and territories varied considerably. Some premiers suggested that the Prime Minister should only invoke the *Emergencies Act* in Ontario, ignoring that it was a national emergency. The Prime Minister pointed out that the trucks in Ottawa came from every corner of the country, that there were staging grounds in Gatineau, and issues at ports of entry in several provinces. The Prime Minister noted that certain premiers had urged the federal government to take action and to assist them, but nevertheless opposed the *Emergencies Act*'s invocation during the discussion at the FMM. Ontario, on the other hand, strongly supported the invocation of the Act. The Prime Minister noted that some of the provinces that expressed opposition to the *Emergencies Act* at the FMM then relied on measures made under it to assist in addressing protest-related activities in their jurisdictions.

The Prime Minister said that he was open to hearing from the premiers that they had a solution and that he did not need to invoke the *Emergencies Act*. He did not hear that. The Prime Minister noted that consideration had already been given to the concerns raised by some premiers, including the risk that invocation would inflame the situation.

Impact of Invoking the *Emergencies Act*

The Prime Minister explained that the decision to invoke the *Emergencies Act* weighed on him personally as it was not something that he wanted to do. He stated that the federal government's priority upon invocation was to keep the measures passed under the Act focused on dealing with the emergency, in a proportionate and time-limited manner.

The Prime Minister noted that since the invocation of the *Emergencies Act*, there have been people spreading the message that the government suspended civil liberties, used violence against peaceful protesters and suspended democracy – which did not happen. There are those who take this message as confirmation that the government is illegitimate and treasonous.



Reflections & Future Considerations

Misinformation, Disinformation and Civil Unrest

The Prime Minister observed that the protest movement reflected the rise of misinformation and disinformation in Canada and the world. He noted that we are living in a very difficult time right now: our democratic system is designed around the sharing of ideas and having an opposition whose job it is to find fault in those ideas, to force governments to think everything through and be able to defend its decision. The problem arises when disagreements are built on falsehoods or wrong facts because then it becomes difficult to have a real debate and genuine exchange of ideas. The government believes in free speech. But with social media, there is a new way to foment anger and hate that is different from anything we have seen before, difficult to counter, and it is destabilizing our democracy. He raised the examples of spoof websites that look real. Our society is losing the common ground that is essential for robust debate in a diverse democracy. The Prime Minister noted that this is not an easy problem to solve, but hopes this Commission will highlight the role that amplification of misinformation had in the convoy.

The Prime Minister emphasized the need for governments to take online rhetoric seriously. He noted that many people shrugged off the protesters' stated aims, such as wanting the Governor General of Canada to remove the government. Perhaps some supporters were not fully aware of what their goals were. But the fact was that some people said that they were going to stay until they did just that, and that they were willing to disrupt the safety of Canadians to reach that goal.

The Prime Minister noted that social media platforms have the power to amplify and mobilize disparate incidents of hate and violence. The Toronto van attack in 2018 and the Quebec City Mosque shooting in 2017, for example, were both perpetrated by individuals who were motivated to action through their participation in extremist social media forums.

The Prime Minister was asked about whether he thought that national emergencies will be more frequent in the coming years, between the growing threat of climate change and increasing social unrest. The Prime Minister acknowledged that the last few years have been tough for Canadians. He noted not only the pandemic, but also the racial injustice highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement, climate change, forest fires, floods, and the fact that war has returned to Europe. He noted that the world is changing quickly and in destabilizing ways. He said that there are two ways to deal with it. Some will pull together, like Canadians did during the pandemic. Others may feel isolated and excluded. He said that civil unrest is possible, but he hoped not. The Prime Minister expressed the view that the *Emergencies Act* was invoked as a specific response that was needed in these particular circumstances. He hopes that there have been sufficient lessons learned – that police now know how to ensure that it does not happen again.



Confidence in Public Institutions

The Prime Minister also expressed concern about the loss of public confidence in governments and institutions. The ongoing protests and convoy-related activities in January and February 2022 contributed to this; that the residents of Ottawa and people across the country lived through three weekends of chaos and their confidence in their country as a place of peace, order, good governance and the rule of law was shaken. There was a sense of shame as the country's reputation on the world stage took a hit, and a sense that 'the centre is not holding'. People saw that the country was not able to deal with basic things like getting essential goods across the border. He recalled that the Ottawa occupation received significant coverage in the international press.

There was a moment where it became clear to the Prime Minister that, if the government did not act in a competent and decisive manner in defense of our country's laws, institutions and critical infrastructure, the loss of trust and confidence in public institutions would have long lasting effects. The Prime Minister said that he understood that he would face political blowback as well as an escalation in threats against him personally if he invoked the EA, but in his view, invoking the *Emergencies Act* in a proportionate, time limited, responsible way, using it primarily as a deterrent and incentive to encourage people to go home freely, was consistent with the kind of country we are and with restoring public confidence. He was willing to take the insults, the threats and the blowback associated with invoking the *Act* to protect that confidence.